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Young People and the Church



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The  
Young People and The Church

WOODROW WILSON



# The Young People and the Church

By WOODROW WILSON

An address delivered before the Fortieth  
Annual Convention of the Pennsylvania  
State Sabbath School Association, at  
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**W**E BEAR a relationship to the rising generation whether we will or not. It is one of the principal tasks of each generation of mature persons in this world to hand on the work of the world to the next generation. We are engaged even more than we are aware in molding young people to be like ourselves. Those who have read that delightful book of Kenneth Graham's entitled "The Golden Age," the age of childhood, will recall the indictment which he brings against the Olympians, as he calls them,—the grown-up people,—who do not understand the feelings of little folks not only, but do not seem to understand anything very clearly; who do not seem to live in the same world, who are constantly forcing upon the young ones standards and notions which they cannot understand, which they instinctively reject. They live in a world of delightful imagination; they pursue persons and objects that never existed; they make an Argosy laden with gold out of a floating butterfly,—and these stupid Olympians try to translate these things into uninteresting facts.

I suppose that nothing is more painful in the recollections of some of us than the efforts that were made to make us like grown-up people. The delightful follies that we had to eschew, the delicious nonsense that we had to disbelieve, the number of odious prudences that we had to learn, the knowledge that though the truth was less interesting than fiction, it was more important than fiction,—the fact that what people told you could not always be relied on, and that it must be tested by the most uninteresting tests.

When you think of it, we are engaged in the somewhat questionable practise of making all the world uniform. We should be very sure that we are very handsome characters to have a full heart in the undertaking of making youngsters exactly like ourselves. There is an amount of aggregate vanity in the process which it is impossible to estimate. Moreover, you will notice that there are very whimsical standards in this world. We speak of some persons as being normal, and of others as being abnormal. By normal we mean like ourselves; by abnormal we mean unlike ourselves. The abnormal persons are in the minority, and therefore most of them are in the asylum. If they got to be in the majority, we would go to the asylum. If we departed from that



law of the Medes and Persians which commands us to be like other persons, we would be in danger of the bars. The only thing that saves us is that the abnormal people are not all alike. If they were, they might be shrewd enough to get the better of us, and put us where we put them.

And we are engaged in rubbing off the differences. We desire not to be supposed to be unlike other persons; we would prefer to abjure our individuality, and to say, as Dean Swift advised every man to say who desired to be considered wise, "My dear sir, I am exactly of your opinion." We try to avoid collisions of individuality, and go about to tell the younger people that they must do things as we have always done them, and as our parents made us do them, or else they will lose caste in the world.

There are two means by which we carry on this interesting work of making the next generation like the last. There is life itself, and that is the most drastic school there is. There is no school so hard in its lessons as the school of life. You are not excused from any one of its exercises. You are not excused for mistakes in any one of its lessons. We say a great many things that are harsh, and deservedly harsh, I will admit, about college hazing; but there is a more subtle hazing than that. The world hazes the per-

sons that will not conform. It hazes after a manner that is worse than hazing their bodies,—it hazes their spirits, and teases them with the pointed finger and the curl of the lip, and says, "That man thinks he knows the whole thing." That, I say, is a very much more refined torture than making a man do a great many ridiculous things for the purpose of realizing that he is ridiculous, and so getting out of conceit with himself. I do not believe in hazing, but I do believe that there are some things worse than hazing. And I have suffered worse things from my fellow-men since I got out of college than I suffered while I was in college.

Life is a terrible master to those who cannot escape its more trying processes. The little urchin in the slums of the city knows more of the prudences of life when he is five than most of us knew at five and twenty. He knows just how hard a school he lives in, and just how astute he must be to win any of its prizes, to win even the tolerance of the powers that conduct it, even to live from day to day. He knows how many cars of Juggernaut must be dodged on the streets for the mere leave to live, and the keenness of his senses, his shrewdness in a bargain, is such as would predict him a man successful in commerce, would mean that

some day he was going to overreach his fellow-man as now life seems to be overreaching him, and imposing upon him, and snatching every coveted thing from his grasp. The process of culture, the process of civilization, and the processes that can be bought by wealth, are largely processes of exemption from the harder classes of the school of life. Some young gentlemen brought up in the lap of luxury seem to have escaped all lessons, seem to know just as little about the world as it is possible for a person to live nineteen years and know. I have sometimes thought that if we could get a whole college of youngsters who had spent their boyhood in the slums, where they had to have wits in order to live, we would make extraordinary progress in scholarship; whereas, when in our discouraged moments,—I mean discouraged moments in our teaching,—we take some grim comfort in saying, as a Yale friend of mine said, that after teaching twenty years he had come to the conclusion that the human mind had infinite resources for resisting the introduction of knowledge. But you cannot resist the introduction of the knowledge that life brings. Life brings it and unloads it in your lap whether you want it or not.

The other means we have of indoctrinating the next generation and making the

world uniform is organization. The individual process is not enough, we think, the process of working upon each other individually so that a miscellaneous set of influences prick each of us like so many currents of electricity. We think we must organize as a body to have a given, definite, predetermined effect upon others. So we take unfair advantage of a youngster in organizing a whole school so that he cannot escape having certain impressions made upon him. We tax the public in order to pay for the schools which will make it impossible for him to escape. And there are various instrumentalities which are organic. In the first place, there is the home; then there is the school; then there is the church; then there are all the political means, the means which we call social in their character, by which to mold and control the rising generation. All of these have their part in controlling the youth of the country and making them what we deem it necessary that they should be.

What do we wish that they should be? If forced to reason about it, we say they ought to be what we have found by experience it is prudent and wise to be; and they ought to be something more,—they ought to go one stage beyond the stage we have gone. But we cannot conduct them beyond

the stage we have reached. We can only point and say, "Here are the boundaries which we have reached; beyond is an undiscovered country; go out and discover it. We can furnish you with a few probabilities; we can supply you with a few tendencies; we can say to you that we think that wisdom points in this direction; but we cannot go with you; we cannot guide you; we must part with you at the opening of the door, and bid you Godspeed. But we want you to go on; we do not want you to stop where we stopped."

What capital, after all, is it that we supply them with? I take it that knowledge is a pretty poor commodity in itself and by itself. A ship does not sail because of her cargo. There is no propulsion in that. If the captain did not know his port, if he did not know his rules of navigation, if he did not know the management of his engines, or have somebody aboard who did, if he did not know all the powers that will carry the ship to the place where her cargo will have additional value, the cargo would be nothing to him. What is his purpose? His purpose is that the cargo should be used. Used for what? For the convenience or the enlightenment, whatever it may be, of the people to whom he is carrying it.

And so with knowledge. The knowledge

you supply to the little fellow in the home is not merely conveyed to him in order that he may be full; the knowledge that is supplied to him in school is not put in him as if he were merely a little vessel to be filled to the top. My father, who was a very plain-spoken man, used to use a phrase which was rough, but it expressed the meaning exactly. He said, "My son, the mind is not a prolix gut to be stuffed." That is not the object of it. It is not a vessel made to contain something; it is a vessel made to transmute something. The process of digestion is of the essence, and the only part of the food that is of any consequence is the part that is turned into blood and fructifies the whole frame. And so with knowledge. All the wise saws and prudent maxims and pieces of information that we supply to the generation coming on are of no consequence whatever in themselves unless they get into the blood and are transmuted.

And how are you going to get these things into the blood? You know that nothing communicates fire except fire. In order to start a fire you must originate a fire. You must have a little spark in order to have a great blaze. I have often heard it said that a speaker is dry, or that a subject is dry. Well, there isn't any subject in the world that is dry. It is the person that

handles it, and the person who receives it that is dry. The subject is fertile enough. But the trouble with most persons when they handle a subject is that they handle it as if it were a mere aggregate mass meant to stay where it is placed; whereas it is something to be absorbed into the pores, to have the life circulation communicated to it, and the moment you communicate that to it, it itself becomes a vehicle of life. Every one who touches a live thing knows he has touched living tissue, and not a dead hand.

So that no knowledge is of any particular consequence in this world which is not incarnate. For example, we are taught the knowledge of the laws of hygiene, but what earthly good are the laws of hygiene to us if we do not live in obedience to them? Presently disease springs upon us, and Nature says, "Thou fool. You knew these things. What profit is it to you to know them and not to regard them in your way of life? They were never yours. They were never part of you. You never possessed them." The moral of which is simply this, that the truths which are not translated into lives are dead truths, and not living truths. The only way to learn grammatical speech is to associate with those who speak grammatically.

And so of religion. Religion is com-

municable, I verily believe, aside from the sacred operations of the Holy Spirit, only by example. You have only to ask yourself what is the effect of a profession of religion on the part of a man who does not live a religious life. You know that the effect is not only not to communicate religion, but to delay indefinitely its influence. It is certainly true that we are not to judge religion by those who profess it but do not live it. But it is also true that if those who profess it are the only ones we live with, and they fail to live it, it cannot be communicated except by some mysterious grace of the Holy Spirit himself. So that no amount of didactic teaching in a home whose life is not Christian will ever get into the consciousness and life of the children. If you wish your children to be Christians, you must really take the trouble to be Christians yourselves. Those are the only terms upon which the home will work the gracious miracle.

And you cannot shift this thing by sending your children to Sunday-school. You may remedy many things, but you cannot shift this responsibility. If the children do not get this into their blood atmospherically, they are not going to get it into their blood at all until, it may be, they come to a period of life where the influences of Christian lives



outside of the home may profoundly affect them and govern their consciences. We must realize that the first and most intimate and most important organization for the indoctrinating of the next generation is the home, is the family. This is the key to the whole situation. That is the reason that you must get hold of the whole family when you get hold of the children in your Sunday-school work; that your work will not be half done when you merely get the children there, and it may be, their mothers. You must include the fathers, and get your grip upon the home organization in such wise that the children will have the atmospheric pressure of Christianity the week through.

We are constantly debating and hearing it debated, How will the church get hold of the young people? You cannot answer that question unless you have a philosophy of the matter. And it seems to me that the inevitable philosophy of the matter is this: There are only a certain number of things that impress young persons, only a certain number that impress old ones, or, for that matter, that impress anybody. The things that impress the young person and the old are convictions and earnestness in action that looks like business, and a certain dignity and simplicity that go along with being in earnest. You will notice that when

a man is going about his business he does not study his gestures, he does not consider his poses, he does not think how he looks when he is sitting at his desk in his chair. There is a directness and simplicity of approach in the thing which shows an utter lack of self-consciousness. He is not thinking about the machinery by which he is acting; he is after the thing.

When we say, therefore, that the way to get young people to the church is to make the church interesting, I am afraid we too often mean that the way to do is to make it entertaining. Did you ever know the theater to be a successful means of governing conduct? Did you ever know the most excellent concert, or series of concerts, to be the means of revolutionizing a life? Did you ever know any amount of entertainment to go further than hold for the hour that it lasted? If you mean to draw young people by entertainment, you have only one excuse for it, and that is to follow up the entertainment with something that is not entertaining, but which grips the heart like the touch of a hand. I dare say that there is some excuse for alluring persons to a place where good will be done them, but I think it would be a good deal franker not to allure them. I think it would be a great deal better simply to let them understand that that is the place

where life is dispensed, and that if they want life they must come to that place.

If they believe that you believe what you say, they will come. If they have the least suspicion that you do not believe it, if they have the least suspicion that you are simply playing a game of social organization, if they have the notion that you are simply organizing a very useful instrumentality of society for moralizing the community, but that you don't after all believe that life itself lies in the doctrine and preaching of that place and nowhere else, you cannot keep hold of them very long. The only thing that governs any of us is authority. And the reason that it is harder to govern us when we are grown up than when we are young is that we question the authority, and you have to convince our minds of the reasonableness of the authority. But the young mind yields to the authority that believes in itself. That is the reason that consistency of conduct is indispensable to the maintenance of authority. You cannot make the young person do what you do not do yourself. You cannot make him believe what you do not believe yourself.

I have known some parents who had very deep doubt about some of the deeper mysteries of revelation, but who, nevertheless, tried to communicate those deep mysteries

to their children, with an absolute lack of success that was to have been expected. They did not believe them themselves. Did you never have the uneasy experience of going into the presence of a child who did not care to speak to you? There are two beings who assess character instantly by looking into the eyes,—dogs and children. If a dog not naturally possessed of the devil will not come to you after he has looked you in the face, you ought to go home and examine your conscience; and if a little child, from any other reason than mere timidity, looks you in the face, and then draws back and will not come to your knee, go home and look deeper yet into your conscience. There is no eye so searching as the eye of simplicity. And you might as well give up the attempt of trying to wear a mask before children, particularly the mask that you are so desirous of wearing,—the mask of hypocrisy. It does not work, and it is a very fortunate thing that it does not work. If it did, we would make our children as big hypocrites as we are. You must believe the things you tell the children.

Have you not seen the flicker of the child's eye when he first asked you if there was really any Santa Claus, and you told him yes? He knows something is the matter. He may not be shrewd enough or

thoughtful enough to know what is the matter, but after that he has his doubts about Santa Claus, simply because, by some electric communication that you cannot stop, your doubts about Santa Claus have been communicated to him. If you are a positivist, he will be a positivist; if you believe, he will believe.

It is all in the atmosphere. Sometimes it seems to me that nine-tenths of what we give other persons is in our personality. The value of one man contrasted with another is that some men have no electricity in them. They might be in the room or out of the room; it doesn't make any difference. Other men come into the room, and the moment they come into it something happens, either attraction or repulsion. I cannot sit in a railroad station comfortably, because men will come in whom I want to kick out, and persons will come in whom I want to go up and speak to, and make friends with, and I am restrained because when I was small I was told that was not good form, and I would not for the world be unlike my fellow-men. So I sit still and try to think about something else, and my eye constantly wanders to some person whom it would, I am sure, be such fun to go and talk to, who I know has something I would like to have. And yet, as for nine-tenths of the

persons in the room, they do nothing but vitiate the atmosphere, and you would rather have their breathing room than their presence.

And it is thus all through life. A man comes to you to press a piece of business upon you, and he goes away, and you say to yourself, "No, I won't go into that."

And some one else says, "Why not? Don't you believe in him?"

"No, I don't believe in him."

"Do you know anything wrong that he ever did?"

"No."

"Didn't he verify his statements?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you go in with him?"

"Well, I don't know. I won't do it. I don't like his looks. There was something about him that made me think it was not all straight, and, at any rate, I will look into it, and hear about it from somebody else before going any further."

We are constantly having that feeling. And that is the feeling which illustrates my thought, though I have gone pretty far afield to illustrate it,—that it is conviction, authority, simplicity, the directness of one who is going about his business, and goes about it with genuineness, which governs young people. The moral of that is, that

you are going the wrong way about accomplishing what you seek when you try to make that entertaining which, in the nature of things, though engrossing, is not entertaining in the ordinary sense of the word.

To tell a human being of the things that affect his eternal salvation I should say is decidedly under-described if you call it entertaining. It is not entertaining in any reasonable sense of the word to tell him of the things that most profoundly affect his welfare in this world and in the next. I know that there are ways of telling men the truth which repel them; I know that too many men are tried for by efforts which merely frighten. I believe that too much effort is made to get people to believe for fear of the consequences of unbelief. I don't believe any man was ever drawn into heaven for fear he would go to hell. Because, if I understand the Scriptures in the least, they speak a gospel of love. Except God draw you, you are not drawn. You are not brought in by whips, you are not drawn by a frowning face, you are not drawn by a threatening gesture. You are drawn by love, you are drawn by the knowledge that if you come you will be received as a son. Nothing but yearning draws you. Fear never drew you anywhere.

You must realize that it is all a question

of personal relationship between man and his Maker, and a personal relationship founded upon love. For love is the only thing that I know that ever led to self-abnegation. Ambition does not lead to it; no use of power for power's sake leads to anything but self-aggrandizement. Can you name me any motive in the world that ever led a man to love another life more than his own except the motive of love? And yet what we are working for in the young people, as in the old, is to show them the perfect image of a Man who will draw all the best powers of their nature to Himself, and make them love him so that they will love him more than they love themselves, and loving him so, will love their fellow-men more than they love themselves. Everything heroic, everything that looks toward salvation is due to this power of elevation. It is a noteworthy thing that we reserve the beautiful adjective "noble" for the men who think less of themselves than of some cause or of some person whom they serve. We elevate to the only nobility we have, the nobility of moral greatness, only those men who are governed by love.

You cannot create love by entertainment, but you can make love by the perfect exhibition of Christ-like qualities, and, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, by the with-



drawal of the veil which for most men hangs before the face of our Lord and Saviour. Our whole object, it seems to me, in church work is simply this: to enable all to see him, to realize him, and if we devote ourselves to that purpose with singleness of heart and without thought of ourselves, we shall suddenly find the seats filling, because where there is fire thither men will carry their lamps to be lighted. Where there is power, men will go to partake of it. Every human soul instinctively feels that the only power he desires, the only power that can relieve him from the tedium of the day's work, the only thing which can put a glow upon the routine of the day's task, the only thing that can take him back to the golden age when everything had a touch of magic about it, when everything was greater than the fact, when everything had lurking behind it some mysterious power, when there was in everything a vision and a perfect image,—is this thing which he sees enthroned upon the shining countenances of those who really believe in the life and saving grace of their Lord and Master.









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